

Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray
Professor Dr. Divya A. Dohss
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 53
Aesthetic Gothic

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)



Week 11: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Lecture 11B: Aesthetic Gothic

Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde

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Hello, and welcome to Week 11's lectures on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In today's discussion, I am going to focus on the idea of Aesthetic Gothic and Gothic doubling in this particular novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:31)



The Picture of Dorian Gray

- “Dorian’s descent into moral squalor is neither admirable nor enviable. Indeed, the beautiful boy is the least interesting character in the book that bears his name. To be sure, it is the epigrammatic wit of Lord Henry Wotton that encourages Dorian on his quest for sensuality and sensation, but Dorian’s values pervert the deeply serious Wildean [ethic](#) that they superficially resemble.”
- Source: Ronan McDonald <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Picture-of-Dorian-Gray-novel-by-Wilde>

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Dorian deteriorates into a personality that is not admirable. He is definitely not the role model for the readers who read this work of art. In fact, Ronan McDonald asserts that this handsome young man is not at all interesting in the novel. In fact, he states that he is the least interesting. What is fascinating for the readers according to Ronald McDonald is the wit or the brilliant mind that expresses itself in the form of attractive, contradictory, paradoxical language, especially the language of Lord Henry Wotton, the role model, friend, philosopher and guide of Dorian Gray.

It is this attractive wit of Henry Wotton that encourages Dorian to enter headlong into this world of sensuality, sensual pleasure, or sensations. The wit of Henry Wotton attracts Dorian into this world of Bohemian sensual life. Dorian's values are not admirable. His life is not something that can be looked up to by the readers. But what is disturbing is the notion that Dorian's values superficially on the surface resemble the values of Wilde’s ethic. It does not just resemble Wilde’s ethic, it complicates it, it problematizes it, it perverts it, it distorts it.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:53)



The Picture of Dorian Gray

- “Whereas Wilde’s essays advocated [individualism](#) and self-realization as a route to a richer life and a more just society, Dorian follows a path of hedonism, self-indulgence, and the objectification of others. It is nonetheless a story that poignantly reflects Wilde’s own double life and anticipates his own fall. Dorian’s negation, “Ugliness was the one reality,” neatly summarizes Wilde’s Aestheticism, both his love of the beautiful and his fascination with the profane.”
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In Wilde’s articles, the author wrote endorsing the idea of individualism. There was a greater emphasis on the individuals’ influence in society. And there was an emphasis on self-realization, knowing oneself being aware of one’s own attributes and character. And these two ideas, the emphasis on individualism and on self-realization, were endorsed by Wilde as pathways by which one could reach a more fuller life as well as a more just and equitable society.

Dorian, in fact, follows as we know a world of sensual pleasure, a world where he indulges himself to the fall and he also turns people into objects. Dorian objectifies people. Now, what critics argued, particularly Ronan McDonald here is that this life of Dorian is a mirror of Wilde’s own double life. In fact, Dorian’s fall is a precursor or full runner of Wilde’s own fall. Dorian’s concept that the idea of ugliness is the concrete reality of life is something that neatly encapsulates Wilde’s philosophy of the aesthetic.

Wilde and Dorian, both were in love with the concept of the beautiful and they both were fascinated by the normative side of life- the profane, the out of the ordinary, the out of their norm. So these are some of the interesting contradictions and mirrors that we can find in relation to this novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:35)

The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a wonderfully entertaining parable of the aesthetic ideal (art for art's sake), and a sneak preview of the brilliance exhibited in plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. What began as an outré, decadent novella, now seems more like an arresting, and slightly camp, exercise in late-Victorian gothic, than the depraved fiction alleged by his outraged critics.”
- Source: The 100 best novels: No 27 – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1891) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/24/100-best-novels-picture-dorian-gray-oscar-wilde>

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This particular novel or novella is wonderfully fascinating. It is entertainment at its best. And in fact, critics argue that this particular novel offers a glimpse of great wit that one can witness in a work such as Wilde's, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

Furthermore, this apparently decadent novel is in fact a very grouping work that reflects the tendency in the late-Victorian literary culture of this proclivity for Gothic moods in narratives. It is more a Victorian Gothic than simply a depraved fiction as some of the detractors of Wilde would label it.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:25)

The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “Dorian Gray is the impossibly beautiful young man who becomes the subject of a portrait by the fashionable society painter, Basil Hallward. When the artist, who has become infatuated with his model, introduces the "young Adonis" to Lord Henry Wotton, he is rapidly seduced by the peer's witty and corrupting devotion to *fin-de-siècle* hedonism, some of it inspired by Wilde's own experience.”

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As we know, Dorian Gray, the central protagonist in this fiction is extremely beautiful and attractive. He is a young man, who is the subject of a painting by a society painter called Basil Hallward. Hallward is obsessed with this artist, which is one of the reasons why he does not want to display this painting in art galleries. Basil Hallward introduces Dorian to Lord Henry Wotton as this young Adonis is fascinated by this witty lord who is full of this hedonistic character, which has come to typify the turn of the century Great Britain. Now, this hedonism that one can see in this novel is inspired according to some critics by Wilde’s own personal life and experiences.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:21)

The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “Under the malign influence of Lord Henry – “the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it”, is one of many Wildean epigrams scattered through the text – Dorian Gray plunges into a decadent and sinister milieu, becoming a slave to drugs and debauchery. His fatal love affair with the actress Sybil Vane alerts him to the secret of his eternal youth: he will remain untarnished while his portrait reflects the hideous corruption of his soul.”
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Dorian Gray comes under the complete influence of Lord Henry Wotton, who argues that the best way to eliminate temptation from one’s life is to become addicted to it, is to kind of give up to it and this is a very famous epigram, one among many that one can find in this work.

Dorian Gray indulges himself and becomes completely addicted to drugs and personal debauchery. And in fact, he comes to know about this fantastical portrait, the changes in that portrait after his disastrous love affair with the actress, Sibyl Vane. Only in the aftermath of that doomed love affair, he realizes that the corruption that he is indulging in is reflected not in his physical persona which is stainless, spotless, and untarnished, but all the stains and corruption is reflected gruesomely in his portrait. So the indication is that the soul is represented by that portrait of Dorian Gray.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:27)

The Picture of Dorian Gray



- “Eventually despairing, the young man blames the artist Hallward for his fate, and murders him. But Dorian Gray can never “be at peace”. Finally, in a horrifying climax, he takes a knife to his own portrait. When his servants find him, the picture depicts their youthful master as they had once known him. The corpse next to it is as “withered, wrinkled and loathsome of visage” as the portrait had been. Art and life are back in harmony, as Wilde intended, and his brilliantly allusive moral tale is complete.”
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Towards the end of the novel, as we have seen, Dorian Gray becomes despairing of his future. In fact, he wants somebody to blame. and he blames Basil Hallward and he eliminates him from his life by murdering him and disposing of his body. However, there is no peace at all for Dorian Gray and in a fantastic Gothic climax, the high point of Gothicism in this particular novel.

Dorian Gray attacks his portrait. He tries to knife his own portrait and the end result is that he ends up killing himself. The picture resembles the handsome young man. The picture becomes very attractive and the dead man resembles the portrait that is the cops becomes hideous, gruesome, wrinkled and reflecting what this picture had been before.

As the critic puts it, life and art have come back to normal. It has attained the harmony that is expected of life and art and thus, the moral message of the novel becomes complete. Dorian is punished. Dorian has been taken to task in a brutal manner at the end of the narrative.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:55)

Aesthetic Gothic



- "The Picture of Dorian Gray proceeds against the background of Walter Pater's aesthetic writings, but also against Pater in a stronger sense. It provides in narrative form a dark, revealing double for Pater's aestheticism that emerges from a potential for dark doubling and reversal within aestheticism itself. The duplication produces not a repetition of Pater but a new version of his views that says what he cannot or will not articulate, including a recognition of the dark dynamics of doubling and reversal that inhabit those views." p.609
- Source: OSCAR WILDE'S AESTHETIC GOTHIC: WALTER PATER, DARK ENLIGHTENMENT, AND "THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY" Author(s): John Paul Riquelme Source: Modern Fiction Studies, Fall 2000, Vol. 46, No. 3, GOTHIC AND MODERNISM SPECIAL ISSUE (Fall 2000), pp. 609-63



Now let us consider ideas related to aesthetic Gothic.

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Oscar Wilde had been influenced heavily by the aesthetic philosophy of Walter Pater. One can see that Wilde's work is in the context of Pater’s aestheticism. However, would Wilde picks upon in relation to the notion of aestheticism is that there is a possibility for a dark doubling, a possibility of reversal and atavism, a regression within the domain of aestheticism itself.

Now this recognition of the possibility of darkness within the domain of the beautiful, the interesting dialectic of doubling and the possibility of going back reversal of sorts is what is fascinating in the work of Oscar Wilde.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:13)

Aesthetic Gothic



- "In the novel, Wilde responds to Pater by projecting the dark implications of Pater's attitudes and formulations in a mythic Gothic narrative of destruction and self-destruction. Wilde simultaneously aestheticizes the Gothic and gothicizes the aesthetic. The merger is possible, and inevitable, because of the tendency of Gothic writing to present a fantastic world of indulgence and boundary-crossing and the tendency of the aesthetic, in Pater, to press beyond conventional boundaries and to recognize terror within beauty." p.610
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This is a fantastic set of ideas put forward by the critic. What Wilde does is take Pater further and illustrate in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a narrative of destruction. We see how Henry Wotton destroys Dorian Gray, how Dorian Gray destroys Sibyl Vane, how Dorian Gray destroys Basil Hallward and how Dorian Gray destroys himself. What Wilde does in this novel is to make the Gothic aesthetically beautiful and make the aesthetically beautiful into a Gothic work of art.

And this possibility of exchange is made feasible by the nature of the Gothic and the aesthetic. We know that in Gothic writing, there is a lot of representation of a fantastic world, an extraordinary world, where there is this possibility of boundary-crossing happening within the Gothic.

Likewise, in the aesthetic, there is a possibility of going over into another ulterior domain, boundaries are transgressed even within the aesthetic and even when there is terror, the aesthetic

focus is on the beauty of it and here we are reminded of the concepts of the sublime as well. So these two domains, the aesthetic and the Gothic, allow such boundary crossings and transgressions between the terror and the beautiful, and that is what Wilde exploits in this particular novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:22)

The Gothic and Aesthetic



- “As an avatar of Narcissus, Dorian Gray embodies both tendencies in a poisonous, self-negating confluence signifying madness. But the madness is not his alone. He shares it with others in the narrative and with the fantastic quality of his story. No one is immune from the madness and its effects.” p.610

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Dorian Gray is an avatar of the philosophy of Narcissus. Narcissus is the mythological character who is extremely in love with his own body. Dorian Gray represents the philosophies of both the Gothic as well as the aesthetic in terms of a poisonous mentality. His madness, according to the critic here, is not an individualistic one-off extraordinary madness. His madness is shared by a lot of others, particularly by Lord Henry Wotton.

And in fact, this madness seems to be contagious. And he also shares this kind of poisonous aesthetic philosophy, a Gothic aestheticism with the quality and character of the narrative itself. It is attractively Gothic. There is a lot of difficulty in resisting this kind of madness and its impact.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:14)

Gothic Revision



- "The narrative provides in the painting and the book a look at the dark as well as the light, at something disturbing that exceeds, as Gothic writing regularly does, the boundaries of realistic representation and the limits of bourgeois values. As a Gothic revisionary interpretation of Pater's late Romanticism, this particular instance of excess marks a turning point in literary history toward literary modernism." P.611

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There are two important tropes or objects in this novel. One is the painting, the portrait of Dorian Gray and the other is the book, which Henry Wotton gifts to Dorian Gray. Through these two objects what is indicated is the possibility for the individual to exceed himself, to approach the world of excess and what one witness when reading this work is the limitation of bourgeois values.

Therefore, what one can interpret through Pater’s late romanticism and the values associated with that kind of idea is that this particular book is a turning point towards literary modernism. The turning point is a cusp where the excess that an individual is capable of indulging in is profoundly examined and analyzed and put down as something which is not going to be valuable for the progression of society.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:09)

Gothic Doubling



- "The reliance on doubling as a symptom of a darkness within both culture and the mind follows Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and anticipates Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Joseph Conrad's writings, especially *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *The Secret Sharer* (1910). The conjoining of light and dark occurs as the narrative of a doubling that becomes visible through acts of aesthetic making and aesthetic response". P.611
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The concept of doubling itself is seen as a representation of darkness, a potential evil that is present not only within the culture of a society but also in the minds of the individuals who inhabit that society. This literary doubling can be seen in Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and it is anticipated in Stoker's *Dracula* and the writings of Conrad.

The doubling is a problematic doubling- there is light, which can be seen as positive, but on the flip side to that would be darkness. Aestheticism is not completely unproblematic, aestheticism is a kind of a Gothic aestheticism and that is troubling because associated with Gothic ideas are elements of reversal atavism, a going backward in civilizational attributes. Therefore, the aestheticism that we find in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a problematic aesthetic and that is indicated through the trope of doubling.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:22)

Atavism



- "The collaborative act of creating the painting brings into being something apparently new, original, and masterful that turns out to be not only beautiful but also atavistic and terrifyingly at odds with the public values of the society that applauds its beautiful appearance. That collaborative act parallels and engages with our own act of reading. It comes to an end at the same time as our engagement with the book reaches closure, once Dorian and his painting are finished." P.611
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There is a doubling here and that double represents Dorian Gray the character, the figure, the handsome young man and his painting. Now we see how this doubling is problematized in this particular fantastic Gothic fairytale-like narrative. While society lauds the beautiful, handsome, young man to a greater extent in the story, the corrupt nature of Dorian Gray is initially at least not visible to society and that corruption of Dorian Gray is expressed only on his painting.

Now this kind of representation can only be brought to a close when Dorian and his painting are complete in a sense, by which Dorian is dead and the painting is no longer a double. It becomes one single entity with no referent in the real. That referent in the real had to be eliminated. The doubling cannot work in such a context.

So these are some of the problematic nature of doubling in The Picture of Dorian Gray. This idea of the exterior surface being problematic is also explored wonderfully in RL Stevenson's The

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, where Jekyll is this upright citizen who is very moral and charitable in nature, but he does have a dark double to his personality and that is Mr. Hyde who commits a lot of gruesome acts in that particular society. Nobody knows that Jekyll is Mr. Hyde until the end of the tale.

Likewise, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian Gray is handsome, beautiful, lauded by society, taken under the wing by Lord Henry Wotton, but we know that this handsome young man is very corrupt, is responsible for a lot of deaths and murders and that is not physically manifest in his figure.

So this kind of disjunction between what one sees and what one really is, is what complicates the story. The exterior personality of Dr. Jekyll or Dorian Gray does not give any indication to the corrupt nature of their soul until the very end. So these are some of the complications that are explored in the idea of Gothic doubling.

Thanks for watching, I will continue in the next session.